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Ship of Gold

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Regensburg and Ploiesti. To these men, surviving 50 such missions seemed too remote a possibility to even dream about. The story has been told by others, but rarely with such insight into the character of these men and the sources of their strength.

For the military historian, this memoir is an interesting revelation of the state of the aircraft and the precombat flight training that was prevalent in 1944. Muirhead's additional duty as an assistant maintenance officer and as a training and check pilot for newly joined replacement pilots illustrates a sharp contrast to today's practices.

Nearing Ploiesti on his 30th mission, Muirhead's aircraft lost an engine and was shot down as he fell behind the protective firebox of his squadron. He and his crew became POWs in Bulgaria where they were treated with indifference and incompetence. They survived with their intellects intact.

This is a thoughtful memoir with little of the youthful camaraderie and the "we band of brothers" flavor of the popular accounts of this time. As Muirhead says: "to remember war is not so much to reveal its brutal matrix as it is to try to understand it." The glory he found was in the survival of an enduring spirit which he shares with us.

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Allen, Thomas and Polmar, Norman.
Ship of Gold. New York: Macmillan,
1987. 256pp. \$17.95

One of the sad events of WWII occurred on 1 April 1945 in the midst of an impenetrable fog in the Formosa Strait, when the U.S.S. *Queenfish* (SS-393) sank the former Japanese cruise-liner *Awa Maru* without even seeing her. She had been given safe passage for a round-trip from Japan to Indonesia to carry vitally needed supplies to Allied POWs still held there, despite the certainty that an unscrupulous and desperate Japan would also use the ship to carry cargo forbidden by the agreement—which, in fact, it did. The *Queenfish* had received notification about the specially privileged Japanese ship, but through a failure of internal communications this was not made known to her skipper.

He reported the facts when he discovered what he had done and was summarily ordered back to base, relieved of command, and court-martialed. Having borne his punishment in stoic silence, he is remembered by submariners of our Navy as a man who did not flinch when the going became rough.

Now the incident has been turned into a novel, a modern shoot-'em-up with oriental overtones. *Queenfish* has become the *Tigerfish*, and the *Awa Maru* has been renamed *Osaka Maru*. Her contraband cargo becomes the secret national treasury of Japan, 75 tons of pure gold. Sunk to the bottom of the Formosa Strait, the gold is a mecca for adventurers and they all arrive there together: Formosa-based

Chinese pirates, the Armed Forces of the Republic of China, a consortium of Japanese bankers with mafia-like (but totally Japanese) motives and connections, the CIA, the U.S. and Soviet Navies (of course), and an unbelievable number of inscrutable Chinese and Japanese operatives who speak sparsely and go to their exotic deaths with samurai-like unconcern, as, for that matter, do some American CIA types.

Even the *Glomar Explorer* is resurrected to participate in lifting the gold-laden *Osaka Maru*, all 11,700 tons of her, from the floor of the Formosa Strait a thousand feet below. Maybe she could do it. Steel weighs less in the water than in air, but as a guess the *Awa* (or *Osaka*) *Maru* might require a lift of about 10,000 tons—much more than the *Glomar Explorer* was supposedly capable of.

Nonetheless, she does it, and then everyone converges on her, not least of these being the consortium of nations fearing the effect of 75 tons of gold on the world economy. Lurking underwater are two nuclear submarines, the Russian *Petroverdets* and (by no coincidence) the new *Queenfish* (SSN-651). Also in the vicinity is the Russian command ship *Pirmorye*, the People's Republic of China's destroyer *Anshan*, the pirate junk *Golden Moon*, and assorted aircraft of all the nations involved.

The public these days wants excitement—plausibility, verity, historical truth, logic—all are nothing before the demand for excitement and release from reality. To many readers of novels, a scenario's true plausibility has little bearing on its popularity. There needs, indeed, to be a logical relationship between points "A" and "B," and then between "B" and "C," along with a certain degree of cuteness, intrigue, sex and blood, and sufficient trivial detail to signal "authenticity." But there seems to be little requirement for logical progression from point "A" to point "Z," and that's the problem with this book. The yarn is pure fantasy. Yet, this reviewer must admit to enough interest in the story and plot to have struggled to suspend his fundamental disbelief that it could happen.

Norman Polmar and Thomas B. Allen need no introduction to those reading this review. Their biography of Admiral Rickover will long outlive them, the accuracy of most of its deductions and speculations established. *Ship of Gold*, however, diminishes their stature. Technically they know their stuff, but no one can truly accept the massive, extraordinary, implausibility of the whole fantastic yarn.

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